A Brief History of St. John Lutheran Church
Cypress, Texas

In the wee hours of a cool night in 1847 they met once again to plan their journey. They were weary yet motivated in their resolve to leave. The small village of Posen in Germany had been their home for some time. But now these sixteen families had determined that their only chance -- their only choice -- was to make the long, arduous journey to North America. The recent political climate in Germany had taken its toll. They departed their homeland on March 25, 1848 in search of freedom and a new life.

Emigrating to what is now known as Northwest Harris County in Texas in 1848, they discovered a new landscape filled with new opportunities. However, new dangers lurked as well. Pioneering the land in the New World proved difficult. They immediately purchased land only to discover it was a fraud deal. Hunger and want were daily guests in their new life. Finally settling along Little Cypress Creek in shacks and huts, eleven members of their small colony were struck by an epidemic of smallpox and died in 1873. Often, traveling profiteers posing as ministers attempted to gain their trust only to disappear in time. While dangers lurked, the people's resolve remained sincere.

Devoutly faithful they brought with them from Germany two books filled with sermons, THE SHEPHERD'S VOICE and Brastberger's EVANGELICAL WITNESS TO TRUTH. They used these routinely for about five years whenever they gathered for worship in their homes.

It was in 1853 that the first church building was constructed. After the end of the Civil War a new building was erected in the same location. In 1872 Pastor Andreas Schmidt became the first pastor of what was referred to as "The Church at Little Cypress".

In 1882, G.W. Behnken, then a young seminary student, came to Texas hoping to return to health following a bout with tuberculosis. His health improved and he served as teacher of the school at St. John. After passing the necessary examinations to serve as minister, he accepted a call as the congregation's pastor but was only able to serve about four years before his health failed again. He and his wife moved to the Klein area to be near her parents. He died shortly thereafter. Although his ministry was short, three of his sons became pastors. The oldest, born while the family lived in Cypress, later became Dr. John W. Behnken, elected president of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod in 1935.

On September 8, 1900 a hurricane devastated Galveston and also caused much damage to the Cypress area. The parsonage,

Church Destroyed. On August 15, 1915, a hurricane destroyed the St. John church building, then only seven years old. It was rebuilt almost at once. Photo courtesy of St. John's Lutheran Church, Cypress, Texas
which had been built in 1877, was badly damaged. Members were asked to donate $1.00 each to cover the cost of repairs.

On Easter Sunday, April 19, 1908, the congregation unanimously voted to build a new and third structure. Member Otto Adam donated land for the new church, a white wooden building with a tall steeple. In the steeple hung a bell with two clangors. The louder clangor was rung to signify the beginning and end of a worship service. The smaller one, making a lighter toll, was rung at specific times during the Lord's Prayer. The bell was also used as a means of communication for the community. It was tolled on Saturday evenings, reminding people living in "the settlement" that the next day would be a day for worship. To notify residents in the area that a church member had died, the bell was tolled in a distinct way to get their attention; then after a pause, it was tolled a number of times corresponding with the years of age of the deceased. By counting the tolls, the residents could be fairly certain of the message being relayed to them.

Galveston was hit by another severe hurricane in August 1915 and the church building was destroyed. A fourth church building, with a charming old steepled sanctuary, was built. It was later sold and moved to Grant Road to become the Windwood Presbyterian Church. After several years the building was again sold and moved to Highway 6 where it continues to serve as a wedding chapel to this day.

Church minutes show compassion and pride. Repentant members are joyfully welcomed back into fellowship. Voters, on April 23, 1916, gratefully acknowledged receipt of a monetary gift from a sister congregation, but chose to return the money since they had already raised the funds for rebuilding their church, and they had a balance of $65 in their treasury.

The congregation of St. John voted to join the Missouri Synod on May 5, 1942. Within months they voted to tear down the old school building, build a new schoolhouse, finish the parish school hall and dedicate it. Improvements in American life of the 1940's is reflected in the addition of electric lights, a water pump, and a butane system to the church by 1945. By the end of the 1940's, all members were fluent in English and the German worship services were discontinued.

In 1949, the church was renovated once more, and again in the late 1950's. Constructed of white river rock and redwood beams the building was constructed on Spring Cypress Road, a location more central to its membership. The bell and cornerstone from the 1908 church were transferred to the new church, dedicated on June 3, 1962. A special bell tower of river rock and stained glass was built near the church entrance in 1978 to house and protect the bell that continues to be used in worship services.
In 1981, it was decided to discontinue the vicarage program at St. John and call an associate pastor. A Mother's Day Out program was started in 1982 and was immediately successful. Also that same year, the congregation switched from using The Lutheran Hymnal to the new Lutheran Worship. By 1984 a Visser-Rowland Pipe organ was dedicated. On June 12, 1988 the congregation celebrated its 135th Anniversary. Shortly thereafter, the need for a third called worker in the area of youth and education became apparent. The congregation's first DCE was installed in 1989.

The decade of the 1990’s was one of expansion. In 1991, five acres was added to the church campus along the Southwest property line, a portion of which has become a ball field and additional parking. In 1997, more property was added with the purchase of an additional five acres. Again, in 2002, five more acres were added, bringing the present church campus to 20 acres.

The Sanctuary underwent remodeling in 1999 and 2000, with renovations to the choir loft and narthex and the addition of the tower to provide new restrooms, a music library, and utility areas, among others.

During 2001 and 2002, a Million Dollar Capital Campaign was followed by the construction of a new Children's Ministry Center, with spacious classrooms, activity areas, library and offices to serve our Sunday School, Vacation Bible School, and Early Childhood Ministry. A Sanctuary Task Force also completed preliminary design work on a new sanctuary.

The first decade of the 21st Century have been seen remarkable growth in God’s mission at St. John. The church staff now numbers 15 full and part time workers, while the Early Childhood Center has more than 70 full and part-time employees. Worship attendance is approaching 800 per Sunday, and the missional emphasis of the congregation defines our ministry. There are two distinct styles of worship each week, and a vibrant Sunday School and youth ministry.

In 2011 following a successful capital campaign, the new worship center was dedicated. With a seating capacity of 800, and designed for expansion to 1000, the new building is the most prominent of the six buildings on the 20-acre campus. The cornerstone quotes Isaiah 56:7 “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.”

St. John is embracing a continuing and growing focus on discipleship as a three-dimensional expression of the Christian faith: celebrating our relationship with God through Christ, living together as we follow Jesus, and sharing the gift of abundant life with people near and far. St. John -- "the Church at Little Cypress" -- continues to seek God’s kingdom and
participate in his mission as expressed in its mission statement. Based on John 10:10, that is to *celebrate, live and share the abundant life of Jesus*.

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